

VZCZCXYZ0013
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHBH #0363 0611609
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 021609Z MAR 06
FM AMEMBASSY NASSAU
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2163
INFO RUEHBE/AMEMBASSY BELIZE 1237
RUEHWN/AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN 5367
RUEHKG/AMEMBASSY KINGSTON 8309
RUEHPO/AMEMBASSY PARAMARIBO 0887
RUEHPU/AMEMBASSY PORT AU PRINCE 3342
RUEHSP/AMEMBASSY PORT OF SPAIN 4508
RUEHDG/AMEMBASSY SANTO DOMINGO 2615

UNCLAS NASSAU 000363

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STATE FOR WHA/CAR WBENT

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [TBIO](#) [SENV](#) [ECON](#) [EAGR](#) [EAID](#) [PREL](#) [BF](#)

SUBJECT: BIRD FLU FEARS LIKELY UNFOUNDED

¶1. Twenty-one wild birds, mostly flamingos, were found dead February 28 on the island of Great Inagua in the Southern Bahamas, and testing is underway to determine if the H5N1 virus, avian influenza, is to blame. Bahamian authorities are working closely with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), which has provided assistance on handling of samples, selection of testing facilities and related technical issues. PAHO officials say that samples have been sent to the UK for testing, with results expected March 2 or March 3.

¶2. On March 1, Poloff spoke with Henry Nixon, Chief Park Ranger for the Bahamas National Park on Great Inagua where the birds were found. Nixon, an expert on flamingos, said that groupings of bird deaths this time of year was common, and while the numbers were larger than usual, they were highly unlikely to be related to bird flu. "This is not the pattern of death one would see from bird flu -- we would have seen hundreds or even thousands of birds dead given the density of birds here." Nixon also showed frustration with the Bahamas National Trust employee who expressed widely publicized concern over bird flu, and said that the speaker knew nothing about flamingos or bird flu. According to Eric Carey, Director of Parks and Science for the Bahamas National Trust, there were multiple normal explanations far more likely for the deaths, and bird flu testing was "merely precautionary."

¶3. Following multiple media reports of possible bird flu March 1, Minister of Agriculture Leslie Miller held an evening press conference attempting to calm fears and protect tourism. "The problem does not exist in The Bahamas," said Miller, even though test results have not been received. Miller repeated the reasoning used by Nixon, that bird flu deaths would have resulted in larger numbers of deaths, and that initial reports by the National Trust employee were exaggerated.

¶4. COMMENT: Bahamian officials are very concerned that the reports could impact tourism, the driving force in the Bahamian economy. Local papers have noted a downturn in stock prices for Kerzner International, owner of the Atlantis Resort, upon wide publication of the bird flu stories yesterday. Atlantis told CDA that bookings have declined in the wake of recent bird flu publicity. This event should help The Bahamas better prepare for bird flu in the future, but it also illustrates the danger of premature speculation in a tourist-driven economy. At this stage, there is little reason to assume the bird deaths are related to bird flu.
END COMMENT.

